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Spirits and friends: expletive nouns in Korowai of Irian Jaya

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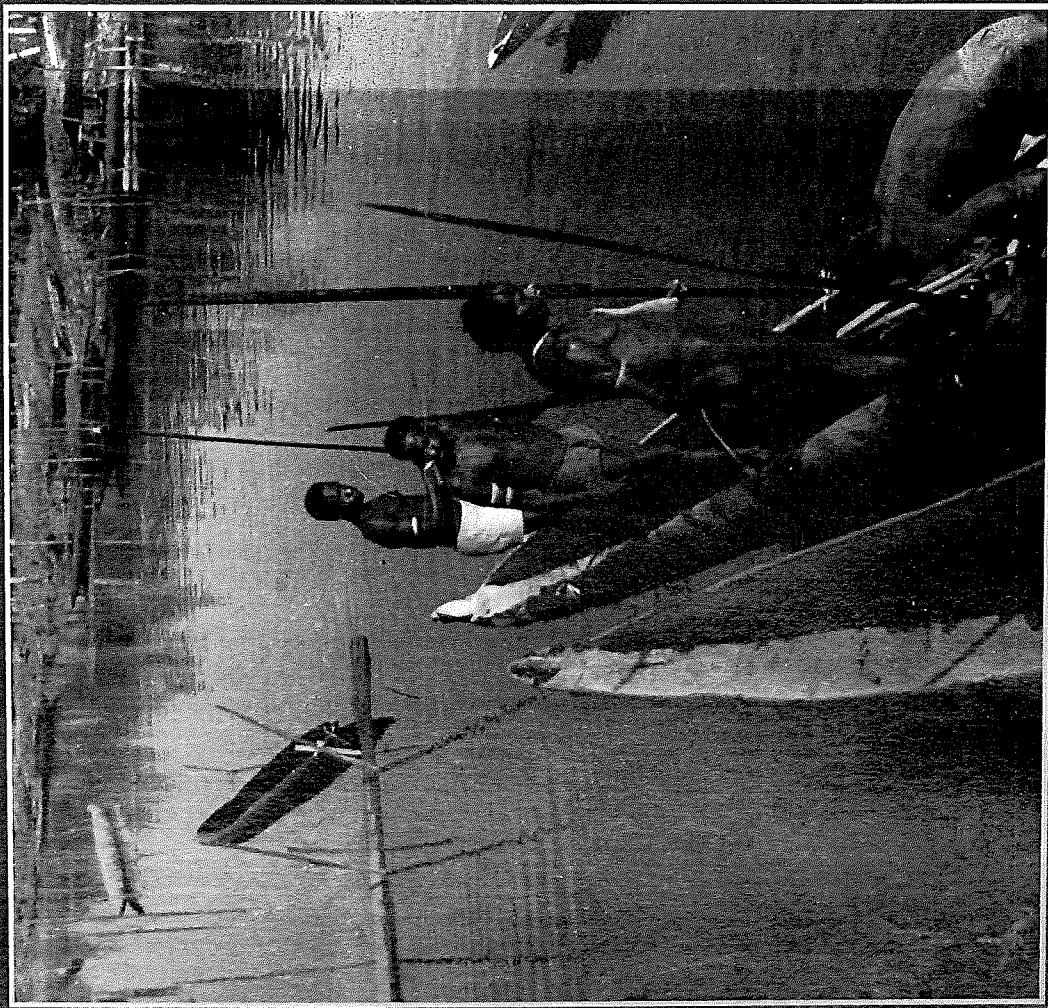
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Tales from a Concave World

Liber Amicorum
Bert Voorhoeve



Tales from a Concave World

Liber Amicorum Bert Voorhoeve

TALES FROM A CONCAVE WORLD
LIBER AMICORUM BERT VOORHOEVE

edited by

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of South-East Asia and Oceania

Leiden University
1995

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Table of C

Editorial /

Lammert /
Ten Gelei

Lois Carri
C.L. Voor

Bram Cran
Studieadre

Chris van
Leve de St

Adri Gerbr
Bert Voor

Patrick de
Great Minc

Jan van Ni
Cor van Ni
Betrouwbai

Jack Prenti
The Asmat

SPIRITS AND FRIENDS: EXPLETIVE NOUNS IN KOROWAI OF IRIAN JAYA

*Lourens de Vries*¹

1. Introduction

Korowai is a Papuan language of the Awyu family spoken in the district Merauke of southern Irian Jaya, Indonesia, in the area (see Map) between the upper Becking and Eilanden rivers and east of the headwaters of the Becking river (Van Enk and De Vries 1994).

Korowai speakers number about 4000. Korowai has Kombai (De Vries 1993) as its southern neighbour. To the east Tsakwambo is spoken, like Kombai and Korowai an Awyu language. North of the Korowai, the linguistic situation is not yet entirely clear. Most probably, the Korowai language borders there on the Kopka language which could very well be a Lowland Ok family language (Kroneman and Peckham 1988). To the west, Citak, of the Asmat family (Voorhoeve 1980), is spoken.

The first regular contacts between (some) Korowai clans and outsiders, Dutch missionaries, started in the early 1980s. Doing linguistic research in the Upper-Digul and Upper-Becking area from 1982 to 1991, I was one of the first foreigners to enjoy the hospitality of the Korowai. The Korowai live in tree houses some 20 meters above the ground, use stone axes and do not know Indonesian.

In this article, I describe a class of Korowai expletives which derive from nouns but function as interjections: semantically, they have no referents, syntactically, they do not have valence and phonologically, they are always pronounced with intonational prominence. For ease of reference, I call them expletive nouns, to

¹ Research for this paper was conducted in the framework of the NWO (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) priority programme "The Irian Jaya Studies: a programme for interdisciplinary research" (ISIR) financed by WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research).

Spirits and

distinguish their
lengthened vowel
semi-vowel) and
For the purposes
expletive nouns
This study brings
ranging from the
Couple to the S

The expletive
sources: proper
'dearness' rela
The Kor
supernatural be
it is words of t
have found the
as expletives: (1
a river-spirit a
Gufom

sations; they
example when
as expletives i
very often us
used as a swi
this spirit live
As far
the Van Enk
mythical pig
noun. Consic

(1) meli-to
fire-wit

¹ I will only dr
published in V.

distinguish them from the other interjections which consist of lengthened vowels and vowel combinations (sometimes with a semi-vowel) and which cannot be traced back to a lexical category. For the purpose of this article, I studied the occurrences of expletive nouns in the corpus of texts collected by G.J. van Enk.¹ This study brings us to points of high emotion in that corpus, ranging from the First Satisfactory Sexual Union of the Original Couple to the Sudden Resurrection of a Buried Man.

2. Spirits and friends

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The expletive nouns in the corpus-Van Enk come from two sources: proper names of 'supernatural' beings and nouns denoting 'dearness' relations (friend, companion, dear).

The Korowai avoid personal names of people, let alone of supernatural beings. But as in so many other speech communities, it is words of taboo and avoidance that are used as expletives. We have found the following proper names of supernatural beings used as expletives: *Ginol*, the creator-spirit, *Gufom*, a water-spirit, *Gén*, a river-spirit and *Faiil*, a mythical pig.

Gufom and *Gén* can be heard daily in Korowai conversations; they are popular swearwords for every day use, for example when somebody hurts himself. The use of names of spirits as expletives is subject to restrictions. For example, the name *Gén*, very often used in contexts of strong amazement, should not be used as a swearword close to the turn of the river Nailop where this spirit lives. That could cause accidents and mishap.

As far as *Faiil* goes, there is a fascinating myth of origin in the Van Enk-corpus in which *Faiil* occurs first to refer to the mythical pig, and much later in the same text, as an expletive noun. Consider first its non-expletive use:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------|
| (1) | meli-to
fire-with | ye
he | mül-khup
former-time | meli-to
fire-with | ye
he |
|-----|----------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------|

NWO (Netherlands
Irian Jaya Studies:
iced by WOTRO
earch).

¹ I will only draw examples from those texts in the Van Enk corpus which will be published in Van Enk and De Vries (forthcoming).

dofo-dakhu sé ap-ta
be.burnt.RESULT.3SG.REAL-SS next there-LOC

maé-takhefi-mekho-do¹ khe-nè
water-open-SUPP.3SG.REAL-DS go-SS

lokhité-do
go.away.3SG.REAL-DS
'In former times with fire he had..., with fire he had burnt (the
world) and then there he had opened the (streams of) waters and
it ran away and..'

(2) ap-ta alo-bo-dakhu-fekho
there-LOC stand-stay.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT

fo-ngg-alingga lu-nè
take-INF.CONN-without move.up-SUPP.SS

be-bakh-i be-bakh-i be-bakh-i be-bakh-i
sit-HOD-3SG sit-HOD-3SG sit-HOD-3SG sit-HOD-3SG
'...there he stood and he kept shoving aside (all of it) for a long
time...'

(3) énonte-bo-tofekho
of.a.long.duration-stay.3SG.REAL-DS

énonte-bakh-i-tofekho
of.a.long.duration-HOD-3SG.REAL-DS
'...it had taken quite a period, but after a long time..'

(4) Faül dadü-ai-tofekho
Faül swim-go.down.3SG.REAL-DS

Faül ül-nè
Faül kill-SS

bul-mekho-kha-fefè
slaughter-SUPP.3SG.REAL-CONN-TOP

Faül ba-nggolol yäüya-pé
Faül chest-bone under-LOC

¹ *Maél lakhafimekho*, litt. 'to open the water(s)' pointing to the action of giving way to the water of a blocked up river. Especially during longer spells of dry weather, the Korowai block up streams in order to catch fish.

Spirits at

fe-nè fu
get-SS p

wola-khi-
world-ov
'...Faül
slaughter
on the g

This text exer
myths about 1
has burnt the
and opened
swimming d
construction

In a n
Couple, two
woman by c
then has sex
and then:

(5) khayal-
kind.of

gomo-1
have.s

be-sikl
NEG-1

malan
kind.c

gomo-
have.i

be-sikl
NEG-

'he n
it stil
had s

fe-nè fu müf-e-kholol
 get-SS put.3SG.REAL back-TR-bone
 wola-khi-pé fe-nè fu-tofekho
 world-over-LOC get-SS put.3SG.REAL-DS
 '...Faül came swimming downstream, after having killed and
 slaughtered Faül, he put his chest-bone part (of meat) beneath (i.e.
 on the ground), his back-bone part he placed towards the sky...'

This text exemplifies the *lamol-aup* genre within the oral tradition, myths about the origin of the world. After the creator-spirit Ginol has burnt the first creation with fire, he cleaned up the remnants and opened a water stream in which the mythical pig Faül came swimming downstream. Body-parts of Faül are used in the construction of the new world.

In a much later episode of this text we meet the Original Couple, two brothers. The older turns the younger brother into a woman by cutting off his penis and scrotum. The older brother then has sex with his brother-turned-sister but it does not feel good and then:

(5) khayal-yabén di-lu-dakhu
 kind.of.fish-fat ?-rub.3SG.REAL-SS

gomo-tofekho
 have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS

be-sikh-té-da-lelo-tofekho
 NEG-delicious-be.3SG.REAL-NEG-be.3SG.REAL-DS

malan-yabén di-lu-dakhu
 kind.of.snake-fat ?-rub.3SG.REAL-SS

gomo-tofekho
 have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS

be-sikh-té-da-lelo-tofekho
 NEG-delicious-be.3SG.REAL-NEG-be.3SG.REAL-DS
 'he rubbed (her) with the fat of the *khayal*-fish and had sex again, but it still did not feel good, so with the fat of the *malan*-snake he rubbed, had sex again but still it did not feel good and...'

tion of giving way
 ls of dry weather,

- (6) wap-ta milon sip non¹
 there-LOC kind.of.sago root.end sago.grub
- dé-dakhu-fekho lu-lu-dakhu-fekho
 get.out.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT rub-rub.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT
- gomo-tofekho
 have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS
- '...there he got a sago grub out of the root end of a *milon*-tree, rubbed repeatedly (with the fat of it) and then he had sex another time and ..'
- (7) Nggé Faül
 friend Faül
- sikh-ayan-telo
 delicious-very-be.3SG.REAL
- "Oh dear, Faül!, this feels very good!"

The first satisfactory sexual intercourse of the Original Couple fills the Older Brother with excitement and the emotion comes out in the use of the two expletive nouns in (7), *nggé* and *Faül*. (The text does not inform us whether the other partner liked it.) *Faül* as a mythical being does not play a role in this episode (5)-(7); in fact, having been killed by the creator-spirit, his role as a mythical participant ended in (4). Notice that in (7) a 'dearness' expletive and a 'supernatural' expletive are combined. This brings us to the 'dearness' expletives.

Other 'dearness' expletives besides *nggé* are: *mayokh* 'friends, dear people' and *khofélapa* 'boy!'. Cross-linguistically, relationship terms with strong connotations of solidarity and helpfulness (friend, dear, mother, brother) are often used as expletives of distress but may also be connected with other emotions such as surprise and amazement. Example (8) is taken from the same myth of origin as the examples (1)-(7). Ginol, the creator spirit, discovers that his fire has gone dead:

¹ The sago grubs (*non*) in the very lower end (*sip*) of the *milon*-sago tree-trunk usually are very fat. The Korowai use the fat of the *sip non* to smear it at a new trap in order to warrant successful hunting. The *sip non* magic is applied here in a sexual context.

Spirits and

(8) Wé
 EXCLM

di-ati-afé-m
 ? -hold-turn
 "Oh help"

In the context th
 been addressed t
 of a 'dearness' i
 analysis is streng
 (8): the interjecti
 vowel interjectio
 interjections.

The (semi-
wé, ü, wü, aü, i,
 to pin down thes
éé and *éi* are typi
 to make him or
 the illocutionary
 and the remain
 amazement, fear
 Example (
 context of fear a

(9) khala yafin
 up stairs

dal-mekho-d
 appearing-S
 'and upstairs

(10) ima-té-tofek
 see-3PL.RE
 '...they look

(11) khof-e-kha
 that-TR-CO

mé-laimekh
 earth-bury-f

- (8) Wé mayokh dé-dakhu meli-tekhé
EXCLM friends QUOTE.3SG.REAL-SS fire-purpose

di-ati-afé-mémo-tofekho

? -hold-turn-3SG.IMM.REAL-DS

'"Oh help" he said and wandered around looking for fire and..'

3S-ATTENT

-tree, rubbed
time and ..

In the context there is no one else around that *mayokh* could have been addressed to; it is safe to interpret the example (8) as a case of a 'dearness' relationship term used as an expletive noun. This analysis is strengthened by the presence of another exclamative in (8): the interjection *wé*. This interjection belongs to the lengthened vowel interjections which may be combined with the noun-based interjections.

The (semi-)vowel interjections of Korowai are the following: *wé, ü, wü, aü, i, ayè, a, o, e, iè, èè, éi*. Although it is very hard to pin down these vowel interjections in terms of their function, *iè, èè* and *éi* are typically used to attract the attention of the addressee, to make him or her listen, *a* and *o* have been found to reinforce the illocutionary force of utterances such as hortations and denials, and the remaining vowel interjections occur in contexts of amazement, fear, shock and surprise.

Example (10) illustrates the use of *khofélapa* 'oh boy!' in a context of fear and shock, following the interjection *wé*:

- (9) khala yafin-bo-ta
up stairs-opening-LOC

dal-mekho-do

appearing-SUPP.3SG.REAL-DS

'and upstairs in the stairs' entrance he appeared, and..'

- (10) ima-té-tofekho wé khofél-apa
see-3PL.REAL-DS EXCLM boy-only.EXCLM
'..they looked but - Oh boy! -..'

- (11) khof-e-kha khomilo-do
that-TR-CONN die.REAL.3SG-DS

mé-laimekho-bakha-ti-kha abül
earth-bury-HOD-3PL.REAL-CONN male.person

sago tree-trunk
near it at a new
plied here in a

Couple fills
comes out in
1. (The text
) *Faül* as a
(7); in fact,
a mythical
s' expletive
gs us to the

re: *mayokh*
ngustically,
idarity and
en used as
with other
(8) is taken
. Ginol, the

lu falé wü
 go.upward.SS appear.3SG.REAL EXCLM

nggé gu laléo
 friend you demon

lai-ati-bo-dakhu lelé-mbol-e-kholo-tè
 come-hold-stay.2SG.REAL-SS come-2SG.PROGR-TR-Q-or
 '...that man who died and who they had buried earlier that day did
 appear right now!, "Oh dear, are you coming as a bad spirit, or...'

- (12) mbakha-mol-mo-dakhu lelé-mbol-e-kholo
 what.Q-SUPP-do.2SG.REAL-SS come-2SG.PROGR-TR-Q

de-té-tofekho
 QUOTE-3PL.REAL-DS.but
 '...how are you coming?', they asked, but...'

- (13) mayokh manda nu khomile-lé-dakhu kho-sü¹
 friends no I die-1SG.REAL-SS there-to

kha-lé-lofekho
 go-1SG.REAL-DS.but

"No, friends, I died and went there, but...'

- (14) debülop-talé² walüp-ta lül aüle-té-do
 road-big half.way-LOC barrier close-3PL.REAL-DS
 '...half-way the big road they had made a barrier and...'

- (15) sé wokhelimekho lailo la-lé-lofekho
 next return.SS return.SS come-1SG.REAL-DS.but
 '...and then I returned and came back, but...'

- (16) gekhené nu mé-laimekho-bakha-ti-do
 you me earth-bury-HOD-3PL.REAL-DS
 '...you already had buried me, and...'

¹ This refers to the journey of the 'soul' (in Korowai: *yanopkhayan* 'the very man') to his own clan-territory in the land of the deceased where he is united with his relatives who went before.

² The dead travel the 'big road' to the land of the dead. When people have lost consciousness and regain it, they have met a barrier on the 'big road' and were forced to return. When somebody loses consciousness, the word *khumilo-* is used to denote that state, the same word which is used for 'to die'. In cases of prolonged loss of consciousness, the relatives begin the wailing and lamentations for the dead.

Spirits a
 (17) senggile-
 be. fright
 dami-mo
 open-SU
 dé-do
 quote.3S
 'I was
 he said :

The expletive
 to the use of t
tsjonge-jonge
 is used as an
 This -*apa* lit
 speakers use.
 receive the s
 The co
 a man who v
 but who, to 1
 land of the li
 tree house ei
 Notice
 used as form
 between the
 The 'dearne
 forms of ad
 This vocativ
 comes form
 E.g. the use
 shock *wü*, c
 address.

Since
 expletive us
 boy' expleti
 use in (10):

- (18) khofé young;
 'Boy,

- (17) senggile-lé amo-do mé-bol
 be.frightened-1SG.REAL do.3SG.REAL-DS earth-hole
- dami-mo le-nè come-SS lu-ba-lé
 open-SUPP.SS enter-PERF-1SG.REAL

dé-do

quote.3SG.REAL-DS

'I was frightened, and having opened the grave I came and entered',
 he said and.'

-TR-Q

The expletive use of *khofélapa* 'boy!' in (10) is strikingly similar to the use of the English exclamation 'oh boy' and Dutch *tjonge* or *tsjonge-jonge*. The Korowai noun *khofé(l)* 'young man, boy', if it is used as an expletive, always occurs with the exclamative *-apa*. This *-apa* literally means 'just, only'. Notice that when Dutch speakers use *jongen* ('boy') as an expletive device, it also tends to receive the special exclamative form *t(s)jonge!*.

kho-sū¹
 there-to

The context for (10) is a text (from the oral tradition) about a man who was buried (in a shallow grave under the tree house) but who, to the shock of those who buried him, came back to the land of the living. In (10) the 'resurrected' suddenly appears in the tree house entrance: it is the climax of the story.

-té-do
 -3PL.REAL-DS

Notice that in (11) and (13) the 'dearness' terms seem to be

10
 REAL-DS.but

used as forms of address (and not as interjections) in the dialogue between the 'resurrected' man and the people who had buried him. The 'dearness' terms like *nggé* and *mayokh* are frequently used as forms of address, also between relatives, replacing kinship terms. This vocative use of 'dearness' terms, in extra-clausal position, comes formally very close to the use as exclamative interjections. E.g. the use of *nggé* in (11), following the interjection of fear and shock *wü*, can be analyzed both as an interjection and as a form of address.

Since *khofé(l)* 'boy' receives a special exclamative form in expletive usage, this ambiguity does not play a role with the 'oh boy' expletive. Compare the vocative use in (18) with the expletive use in (10):

1
 'the very man')
 ; united with his

people have lost
 ; road' and were
 'khomilo- is used
 ases of prolonged
 ions for the dead.

- (18) khofé mano-pelu-m-é-o
 youngster well-grow-2SG.ADHORT-EXCLM-EXCLM
 'Boy, you should grow well!'

3. Discussion

The lexical sources from which Korowai draws expletive nouns are the same sources that are found in many other communities: names of gods/spirits/mythical beings and nouns denoting 'dearness' (solidarity) relations. In the latter category, many languages use kinship terms with strong connotations of solidarity, such as mother or brother, as expletives (cf. the expletive use of mother-terms in Italian *mamma mia!* and Kannada (of India) *amma* (Bean 1981)) but we have not found Korowai speakers use kinship nouns as interjections. Instead, Korowai uses non-kinship 'dearness' terms for expletive purposes.

When bodily functions are strongly taboo and subject to avoidance, then words denoting them also tend to be used as expletives (cf. English 'shit!'), but we have not found Korowai expletives from such sources.

More research is needed to establish in which contexts the Korowai use 'supernatural' expletives (power/taboo) and in which contexts they use the 'dearness' expletives (solidarity). Notice that we have examples (such as (7) above) in which expletive nouns from both sources are combined in one expression.

A small number of Korowai speakers is regularly exposed to the local variety of Indonesian spoken at the mission station Yaniruma. In that variety of Indonesian, the two most frequently used expletives are *cuki main* (possibly of Biak origin) and *bukan main* (from standard Indonesian but the use is much more general than in standard Indonesian). We have not yet heard Korowai speakers use these Indonesian expletives when speaking Korowai, although they readily borrow other items from Indonesian.

4. Abbreviations

ATTENT	attention-marker
CONN	connective
DS	different subject (switch-reference)
EXCL	exclamative
HOD	hodiernum tense
INF	infinitive

LOC
NEG
PERF
Q
REAL
RESULT
SG
SS
SUPP
TOP
TR

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LOC	locative
NEG	negative
PERF	perfect
Q	question-marker
REAL	realis
RESULT	resultative
SG	singular
SS	same subject (switch-reference)
SUPP	verbalising support-verb
TOP	topic
TR	transitional sound

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'dearness'
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MAP: KOROWAI AREA

